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Shenila Khoja-Moolji’s The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood

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Résumé de l'article

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Unveiling the Political Framing of Muslim Boys as Terrorists in the Making

A Review of Shenila Khoja-Moolji's *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood*

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This book review discusses The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood *by Shenila Khoja-Moolji, which provides valuable insights into how Muslim boys are constructed as potential "future terrorists" in both American and Indian contexts. Khoja-Moolji explores how this invented image denies Muslim boys innocence and is shaped by the collective trauma of past terrorist attacks and anxieties about imagined future threats. She also examines the intersectionality of this constructed image, highlighting how it is influenced by the dynamics of anti-Muslim racism, racial capitalism, public discourses, and institutional practices.*

Key words: *Muslim boyhood, future terrorists, intersectionality, racism*

In recent times, the word *terrorist* is almost entirely linked to non-white Muslim males. This association represents a disturbingly monolithic image of Muslim males based on widespread false public narratives in the Western world that terrorists are "brown Muslim men" (Corbin, 2017) and that Islam is a threat to its security. Constructing Muslims as threats reflects their racialization, which was a result of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States that incited a global war on terror. As Beydoun (2022) comments, racism in post-9/11 America operates to cast a ubiquitous image of Muslims as perpetrators of terror:

> *Terrorism* has taken on a pointed racial and religious form. Muslims, transnationally, have been 'raced' as terrorists as a consequence of this American-led crusade. Their faith is conflated with extremism and their portrayal in American media is constructed based on that conflation. (p. 4, italics in original)

This imagined threat of Muslims is one that counterterrorism laws, policies, and state surveillance practices in the Western world heavily rely on. However, little is known about how this invented image extends to Muslim youth and the possible implications it has on their everyday lives.

In *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024, 106 pp.), Shenila Khoja-Moolji unpacks the intersectional dimensions of the construction of Muslim boys as future terrorists in post-9/11 America. She critically examines how the dynamics of racialization, American racial capitalism, institutional practices, and public discourses fuse to produce an invented image of Muslim boys as proto-terrorists. This book is a profound and timely contribution to research on Muslim youth and a continuation of Khoja-Moolji's work on the intersectionality of Muslimness across various global contexts. Khoja-Moolji identifies a critical gap in the scholarly work on Muslim youth, which has tended to focus primarily on how they experience racialization, finding it relatively limited in comparison with studies on Muslim adults. Khoja-Moolji indeed succeeds in taking this research further by situating Muslim boyhood within contemporary anxieties that are triggered by anti-Muslim racism and past terrorist attacks.

In *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood*, Khoja-Moolji argues that the image of Muslim boys as proto-terrorists, or terrorists in the making, is an invented one that is shaped by traumas of past terrorist attacks and anxieties around imagined future ones. Using a thorough cultural analysis of an array of incidents in American airports, schools, and towns where Muslim boys were subjected to surveillance, arrests, bullying, violence, and even killing, the author draws attention to how the dynamics of "race," religion, and gender operate along with racial capitalism and statist logics in the production of this image. She contends that this invented image legitimizes the subjugation of Muslim boys to the disproportionate responses of the carceral state in the forms of security, surveillance, and punishment. The proto-terrorist, as she elaborates, is an image that has been fuelled by and is fuelling America's war on terror and its economies, and it is one without which American new imperialism simply would not exist. Khoja-Moolji interweaves her analysis with multiple conceptual resources to further argue that the construction of Muslim boys as proto-terrorists constitutes an act of racialization that operates in different and contradictory ways. For example, the dynamics of racism operate along with the politics of innocence to exclude Muslim boys from childhood. They are not like other, "innocent" boys who are free to experiment on their own.

Although the book is almost entirely focused on examining the invented figure of Muslim boyhood in the United States, its scope is extended to another global context: the Indian subcontinent. This focus is intended by the author to showcase how imaginaries of Muslim boyhood play out in other contexts to produce different forms of threat. The author's multilayered examination of the politics of Muslim boyhood sits well with the intersectionality of Muslimness where the experiences of Muslim boyhood and what shapes them cannot be seen as uniform across different contexts. I find this application to be particularly useful in understanding how the dynamics of racialization intersect with local ideologies, discourses, and practices to codify the bodies of Muslim boys and children differently across global contexts.

The organization of the book

In four chapters, Khoja-Moolji critically examines the invention and rearticulation of the political image of the Muslim boy as a terrorist in the making. In the first chapter, she provides a background on the image of Muslim boyhood in the American context and introduces the main focus of her book. She draws attention to the circulation of this image as a source of imagined threat in public discourses and ordinary surveillance practices by drawing on a wide range of resources and examples of arrests, detentions, violence, bullying, and killing across a variety of settings that Muslim boys in America have been subjected to.

In the second chapter, Khoja-Moolji discusses how American imperialism and warfare capitalism have formed and reformulated what constitutes an ongoing threat in the United States that resulted in the production of the political image of Muslim boys as future terrorists. She argues that contemporary depictions of Muslim boys as a source of threat are iterations of longstanding ideas about the monstrosity of Muslim men dating back to medieval times which locate pathologies in Muslim bodies. Furthermore, monstrosity fuses with Foucauldian "abnormality" to not only construct Muslim boys as terrorists but to produce a sense of anxious detection and management of future problematic issues. This is clearly evident in American schools, airports, and borders. In other words, the Muslim boy as the future terrorist has to be made a visible threat to the American public and state security in order to be managed and detected before any attempt to defuse it can be made.

In the third chapter, Khoja-Moolji shines a light on the instrumental use and commercialization of the image of Muslim boys as terrorists by capitalist elites. The author presents two examples of this instrumental portrayal in relation to whiteness: Ahmed Mohamed and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. Ahmed Mohamed, who constructed a homemade clock, was arrested in his school on the suspicion of being a terrorist and was later celebrated as a

"budding scientist" in a bid to buy public goodwill. Mohamed was renarritivized from being a suspect of terror to a model immigrant / future tech worker and was thus granted temporary access to innocence. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who was one of the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing, was featured in a *Rolling Stone* magazine cover to appeal to people who desired to *see* terrorism. The issue that featured Tsarnaev made record-breaking sales. These portrayals and instrumental stagings, as the author argues in this chapter, reiterate longstanding stereotypes of the "Islamic" monstrosity and rearticulate Muslim boyhood as a threat.

Also in this chapter, Khoja-Moolji presents a novel perspective on Muslim boyhood using what she terms "commodity antiracism" to understand how capitalism and commercialization racialize Muslim boys in different ways based on their relation to whiteness. Ahmed Mohamed was a Black Muslim boy and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was a white Chechnyan Muslim. According to Khoja-Moolji, commodity antiracism is a hypocritical and cunning form of capitalist benevolence "where anti-racism is commercialised and used to buy public goodwill" (p. 63).

In the fourth and final chapter, Khoja-Moolji branches from the broader impact of racialization on Muslim boys to its impact on the intimate level in their everyday lives, drawing on focus group data. She describes their racialization in relation to hegemonic whiteness that limits these boys to certain spaces and uninhabitable subject positions. At the end of the chapter, the author extends the scope of her analysis to India to examine how the image of the Muslim boy appears in a different context, highlighting continuities and differences. She demonstrates how Muslim boys experience racialization in relation to religious and ethnic absolutism. Ethnonationalist ideologies of Hindutva racial supremacy and the religious discourse of purity portray Muslim boys as a threat to the Hindu nation. Khoja-Moolji's application of Muslim boyhood as a heuristic indeed shows that the production of threat is not uniform and that Muslim boyhood is mobilized in relation to imagined states of purity.

Muslim boys and the politics of innocence

There are points in this book which I found to be highly relevant to the study of Muslim childhood and youthhood. One of these points relates to Khoja-Moolji's discussion on Muslim boyhood and the politics of innocence. The relationship between childhood and innocence represents an important and ongoing debate in childhood studies. The contemporary view of childhood as a time of purity and innocence has been shaped by romantic and Rousseauian ideas about childhood that imagined children as innocent, without sin or sexual feelings and lacking knowledge. However, this imagined innocence of childhood was racially codified as it has never been equally available to all children. According to Bernstein (2011), white children embodied innocence, while Black children were seen as labouring, unchildlike bodies in need of discipline. As Sharpe (2016) notes, "Black children are not seen as children" (p. 89) because they are positioned "outside of the category of *the child*" (p. 89, emphasis added).

Khoja-Moolji directs our attention to how the politics of innocence excludes Muslim boys from boyhood in the same way it excludes Black and Brown children. In the Western context, and especially in post-9/11 America, Muslim boys are projected with great maturity, precociousness, radical proclivities, and hypersexuality and are denied entry to the space of childhood purity. According to examples from public discourses and representations in American media provided by the author, Muslim boys are read as "unchildlike children" and "foreign delinquents" and hence do not fit the model of the innocent white child. As Khoja-Moolji comments, boyhood is viewed as a typical developmental stage in the lifespan of an adult and is often associated with experimentation and anticipation of discipline from adults. However, in the case of Muslim boyhood, Muslim boys can only experience discipline from adults but not experimentation. Hence, Muslim boys are excluded from innocence and denied entry into this space of purity. Muslim boyhood thus cannot exist and in turn becomes a developmental stage in the lifespan of the terrorist.

Overall, Khoja-Moolji provides a nuanced exploration of the political figuration of Muslim boys. I believe that this book is a valuable addition to the reading list of everyone interested in the intersectionality of Muslimness. As a researcher interested in researching Muslim childhood, I appreciate how the author encourages us to think about the application of Muslim boyhood as a heuristic device to see how it operates in divergent contexts.

To conclude, *The Impossibility of Muslim Boyhood* interrogates the invented image of Muslim boyhood in the American context and beyond. It is a useful read for students and scholars interested in understanding the global racialization of Muslims post-9/11. As Selod and colleagues (2024) articulate, the racialization of Muslims in the Western world entails specific stereotypical tropes about Muslims and is not a "one-size-fits-all approach" (p. 8). "The terrorist" is one of these tropes. Yet, Khoja-Moolji invites the reader to see how the invented image of the terrorist does not operate in isolation from the dynamics of racism and is not experienced uniformly across different settings.

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